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Publishing social enterprise rooted in lived experience of diversity and disadvantage

Steve Mcnaught

Summary

The Arkbound Foundation is a social enterprise and charity that supports people from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds to have their voices heard through writing. The enterprise is an example of how small initiatives started by those from excluded backgrounds can grow fast, overcoming numerous obstacles, to give international impact in the social, cultural and environmental spheres. Now four years old, Arkbound has a functioning academic branch that is dedicated to supporting intersectional and cross-disciplinary research, new publications and knowledge transfer, together with supporting the voices of those in the Global South getting heard, who are most at threat from climate change. A pioneering social enterprise that has received commendation from HRH Prince Charles, won local and national awards, been the subject of dissertations and developed training courses and books that are referred to by international bodies and educational institutions – Arkbound is a model of high impact entrepreneurship that provides hope for others looking to do similar work.

Keywords

Arkbound Foundation, Arkbound, Publishing charity, Literature charity, Social inclusion, Social enterprise publisher, High impact entrepreneurship

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Publishing social enterprise rooted in lived experience of diversity and disadvantage

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Problem discovered

Published literature is partial and unbalanced, which is unfair in relation to the equal importance of having a voice and the urgency of coverage of issues, or stories to be told. Published accounts are from a particular segment of society, with a diversity deficit for those coming from minority backgrounds or positions of social marginalization. Two striking examples: among British young adult books, just 8 percent of titles published between 2006 and 2016 were by authors of colour; in terms of disability, only 4 percent of those working in the publishing industry identified as having one. In contrast, the UK census data shows 22 percent of people have a disability and 12 percent come from a black or minority ethnic background. For higher tier roles within the publishing industry, representation of people from diverse backgrounds is even lower. Similar deficits exist for those who have experienced severe social exclusion as a result of homelessness, imprisonment and refugee status. It is no coincidence that these same groups are at heightened risk of wider discrimination and prejudice: their voices are unheard, their unique insights not taken into account, and the cycle of social exclusion continues at an unchallenged, cognitive level across society. By denying these groups a fair chance to be represented in publishing, they cannot access all the benefits that it can give – from new skills and career networks to the mental health and wellbeing boosts that come through writing, as well as having an influence through being heard on policies that directly relate to them.

The intervention

By supporting and engaging with people from marginalized backgrounds, including through 1-1 mentoring and workshops in deprived areas, we can get their voices heard in literature. This can culminate in:-

1. Published books (audio, digital and print format). One example: 'Tick Tock, It's Time to Listen' by Lauren Smith – a young author with autism who writes about the impacts of her condition in the education system; the author was provided with 1-1 mentoring support and the book carefully edited, formatted and designed by experienced publishing professionals. It was then made available for distribution, with launch events in book retailers also organized.
2. A focus on works not only by diverse and disadvantaged authors, but which cover important social or environmental impacts from their perspective. Two books of poetry are by authors with direct experience of homelessness: the books not only advance the authors' perspectives, but in doing so provide an informed narrative on a current political issue that is often overlooked. The mainstream media accounts, for example, are by and for people with little or no direct experience of homelessness.
3. Work placements. We have created numerous vacancies within our charity, sometimes funded by third parties and sometimes by ourselves, as well as referring

people to other media organisations and publishers, who go on to secure permanent employment as a result. The placements have lasted anything from 2 weeks to 3 months, focusing on people from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds who would otherwise face barriers to entering the publishing industry. Through these placements they gain experience in editing, proofreading and promotion of individual titles. In the process it enables them to convey their own insights around socio-economic backgrounds and understand that of others.

4. Events, online and offline, which promote the published work. All books have some kind of launch event: even with the circumstances around COVID-19, we arranged a large scale online event for our latest book, contacting interest groups around the world to participate. In the process we learned how online events can have wider participation and foster global connections.
5. A continuation of blog articles by diverse contributors – these are published via www.arkbound.com, Medium and www.arkbound.ac.uk

During the process of our work we have developed an academic division with a focus on intersectionality and cross-disciplinary study, whilst engaging with young people who face disadvantages, including those in the Global South¹. Theoretical models with an overt focus on specialization and reductionalism can foster compartmentalized thinking and exclusion – two things that underpin social and environmental exploitation. A more connected, inclusive perspective of the world is at the core of tackling many present challenges, and writing remains the best medium of social change through its longevity and reach. It is hard to envisage how a complex civilization can exist without some form of writing, albeit its modes of expression have become more diverse through digital and audio mediums.

Throughout this process we have adopted an approach of deep collaboration and flexibility: taking on feedback from people we engage with, collaborating with other organisations, moulding our academic methodology around the latest research. This has allowed for innovative project delivery, including engaging with groups who have been most adversely impacted by COVID-19, to convey their stories and insights; collaborating with the Glasgow COP26 Collective to find partners in the Global South who can connect with indigenous communities, who face heightened threats, and much more.

Details of the impact

From a small start-up with just a £2000 Prince's Trust loan, we have produced over 30 titles, run international projects, developed national training and work placement programmes, and continue to generate deep social impact. We have managed to publish numerous works by people with experience of severe social exclusion, as can be seen at www.arkbound.com/featured-books. Many of these works have led to contributions and changes in the discourse around key social issues:

- Voices of Bristol (gentrification and racial prejudice)²

¹ Defined as those who live in third and second world countries, generally south of the equator, who face heightened impacts from climate change.

² <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/gentrification-bristol-what-it-happening-3030745>

- Tick Tock, It's Time to Listen (insights into how the educational system needs to change for the needs of those with autism)³
- No Homeless Problem (challenges stereotypes towards homeless people)⁴
- A Journalism Handbook for Media Entrepreneurs (addressing lack of diversity in media industry, educational resource)⁵

In terms of the latter book, it has been used as an educational resource by universities in the UK and under the Council of Europe's Accelerating Media Diversity Project⁶. Arkbound's core involvement in the Council of Europe's Diversity Accelerator project itself has resulted in Europe-wide insights showcased at the Perugia International Festival of Journalism (Italy) and New York Journalism Convention (USA).

Arkbound Foundation co-organised the milestone event of 30 years of Bristol Disability Activism in 2019 hosted at the Arnolfini International Arts Centre. The 300 places were booked out weeks in advance. Arkbound provided an art exhibition, a "Wall of Thoughts", art and writing workshops, as well as free vegan cakes and snacks. Since then we are actively supporting lived experience disability activists and representatives. They form our steering group to move our publishing project of "Untold Stories – Disability Activism" forward⁷.

Arkbound was commended at Bristol's M-Shed's 5-year exhibition "You make Bristol", for being "Unsung Heroes" who really care and make a difference.⁸ Our work placement programmes have seen new opportunities for young people from otherwise excluded backgrounds.⁹ Our environmental sustainability work has been recognized since 2016¹⁰ resulting in the development of numerous projects, culminating in our accredited academic branch (www.arkbound.ac.uk) with ongoing work with other organisations (UNA: <https://unafest.com/partnerships/>, Climate Fringe, Glasgow Social Enterprise Network).

About the organization

We are an equalities and lived experience *founded* and *led* organization, starting as a social enterprise in 2015 and incorporated as a charity in 2017, working Non-Profit.. Our Board of Trustees comprises people from a range of different backgrounds, who ensure fair and informed representation for the groups we seek to support.

Initially supported by the Prince's Trust, Arkbound was commended by HRH Prince Charles himself and went on to achieve recognition for its work, through exhibitions and awards. These achievements are especially notable given the challenges we have overcome – including one attack by a British far right media outlet, in an attempt to undermine the much-needed

³ <https://www.uel.ac.uk/news/2019/04/uel-student-calls-for-action-in-autism-awareness-week>

⁴ <https://emmaus.org.uk/leeds/new-poetry-book-now-available-from-emmaus-leeds/>

⁵ <https://www.bol.com/nl/f/a-journalism-handbook-for-media-entrepreneurs/9200000089308382/>

⁶ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/diversity-accelerator>

⁷ https://www.headfirstbristol.co.uk/#date=2019-07-27&event_id=55443

⁸ Examples of direct feedback can be seen at Google: <http://shorturl.at/fzAK6> and multiple other review sites

⁹⁹ <https://publishingdegree.co.uk/author/millyrochow/>

¹⁰ <http://www.bristol-business.net/go-green-award-winners-praised-for-helping-build-citys-environmental-prowess/>

reforms of the Leveson enquiry¹¹. We have also in many cases fought through periods of low funding, drawing upon huge voluntary support (as of present, we have 48 active volunteers) to keep our projects and social impact going. We are unlike many other social enterprises through our socially excluded origins, being equalities led, and achieving a huge amount of work with very little funding. Indeed, we are now looking into ground-breaking research on new economic models, in some cases representing a shift away from the monetary-mediated system to a cooperative, circular economy model.

About the leaders



Steve Mcnaught – Founder of Arkbound, he was initially supported by the Prince's Trust having become involved in crime at a young age and spending time in prison. He has used his insights from a position of social exclusion to connect with those from marginalised backgrounds. Longford Trust awardee, he is a regular speaker at University panels.



Waltraud Pospischil – Val was born in Austria and came to the UK in 1982. She trained under R. D. Laing and lived as a research student in a Philadelphia Association therapeutic community, combining being near to her partner with doing a practical for her MA. Since that time Val has taken up numerous voluntary posts, which she hopes will improve social provisions, mainly for the most disadvantaged people. She is a keen artist, poet and writer – with experience working alongside Koestler Trust in their initiatives. Val is also a South West ambassador for Outside In.



Jamie Nixon – Jamie is a PhD graduate from Glasgow University whose main interest is around empowering people from marginalized backgrounds through writing. He has mentored and edited numerous texts, including the most recent and landmark Scottish book 'The Gods of Frequency'. His experience also includes project management and authorship.

¹¹ The Leveson inquiry was a judicial public inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the British press following a phone hacking scandal by Murdoch owned News International. Findings and recommendations were made to make the UK press more accurate and accountable – although none of these were fully implemented by the government, which is heavily linked to the dominant right-wing media outlets, in a manner reminiscent of the propaganda situation observed by Noam Chomsky ('Manufacturing Consent') about the US media and government.



Mike Findlay - Mike is a senior communications professional and freelance writer based in Scotland. His interests include mental health, equality and social justice. He has worked for over 18 years in various communications roles within health, higher education, social justice and the arts in both London and Glasgow. He has a postgraduate qualification in journalism from Birkbeck, University of London and a COSCA Certificate in Counselling Skills from the University of Strathclyde. Mike is passionate about communicating and writing about issues related to social justice and mental health and well-being. You can follow him on Twitter @MikeFindMedia

Sources to corroborate the impact

Aside from the above links mentioned, please feel free to refer to:

<https://bristolgreencapital.org/arkbound-launch-latest-boundless-magazine-following-successful-better-bristol-campaign/>

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